Filial Daughters? Agency and Subjectivity of Rural Migrant Women in Shanghai

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Abstract

In China, continuous rural–urban migration on a massive scale disrupts the traditional rural patriarchal society and makes the temporary non-patrilocal way of residence possible. This new residential pattern has brought profound changes to the lives of migrants. Based on participant observation and interviewing, this article intends to explore the exercise of agency and the representation of subjectivity of female migrant workers in intimate relations after migration. By emphasizing the intergenerational relationship and partner relationships of both unmarried and married women, I demonstrate a complicated picture regarding the changing status of rural migrant women and show how these women both conform and challenge the social norm of filial obligations, through which their agency is exerted and subjectivity is crafted.

Keywords: agency; subjectivity; China; filial piety; rural migrant women; intimate relationship

Over the last 30 years, China has undergone a profound economic transformation. By the end of 2014, China had 168.21 million migrant workers holding rural household registration (*hukou* 户口)[1] but doing non-farmwork outside their registered hometowns or home villages, accounting for 12.3 per cent of the entire population.[2] The shift in geographical location causes profound changes to migrants' intergenerational and conjugal relationships. The post-migration pattern of residence can be viewed as temporarily non-patrilocal. This refers to post-marital residence where a couple does not live close to the natal family of either the husband or the wife, as well as to the mode of residence taken up by adult children who separate from their parents before marrying. Traditionally, children live with their parents until they are married (although some parents continue to live with one of their sons after his marriage). Migration disrupts the conventional patriarchal way of living for both married and unmarried migrants.

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1 *Hukou* refers to the household registration system in China that categorizes citizens as either urban or rural.

2 NBS 2015.

 doi:10.1017/S0305741016000357 First published online 2 May 2016

I use the word non-patrilocal rather than neolocal because the latter is not capable of capturing the specific form of migrants' post-marriage residence. After marrying, my female informants tried to establish nuclear families in new houses that were geographically close to the husband's natal family. However, the newlyweds rarely used the house, because they usually returned to resume their work in Shanghai soon after marriage. Neolocal residence refers to a mode of post-marital residence where a couple lives separately from either the husband's or the wife's natal family. It can include the conventional patrilineal residence mode whereby newlyweds live geographically close to the husband's natal family. By combining the terms temporary and non-patrilocal, I intend to highlight the fact that the married couples in this study migrate to a place that is close to neither natal family, although this migration may only be a temporary period in their lives.

There has been a significant amount of quantitative literature addressing the issue of rural–urban migration in China.[3] Although quantitative research paints a general picture of migrant workers, it is less able to address the complexity and the heterogeneity of migrant workers' experiences in urban China. There has been some qualitative research that has addressed rural migrant women's experiences including agency, resistance and the desires of factory women,[4] domestic workers[5] and restaurant workers.[6]

Continuous migration on a large scale, rural women's increasing participation in the labour market in urban areas and the concomitant non-patrilocal mode of residence have all brought changes to migration. For example, when Tamara Jacka did her fieldwork in the late 1990s and early 2000s she found that migrant women exhibited both filiality and rebellion in daughter–parent relationships.[7] Although my fieldwork, conducted in 2011–2014, found the same characteristics in female informants, the reasons acounting for their filial and rebellious behaviour and partner-finding patterns can be different. Jacka found that migrant women continued to demonstrate filial behaviour after migration as a strategy to maintain their good reputation so that they were marriageable back in home villages.[8] My informants, on the other hand, preferred to find their partners in urban areas, which was sometimes against their parents' wishes. In addition, Jacka found that some parents opposed their daughters' out-migration because it was not common at that time for single women to migrate on their own and it might damage their reputation,[9] whereas I found that parents encouraged daughters to migrate because it had beome the norm for young people in rural China regardless of their gender.

3 For quantitative research, to mention just a few, please see Cao 2010; Lü et al. 2010; NBS 2015.
4 Chan, Anita 2002; Chan, Jenny, and Pun 2010; Chang 2008; Lee, Ching Kwan 1998; Pun 1999, 2005, 2012.
5 Gaetano 2004; Jacka 2006; Yan, Hairong 2008.
6 He 2007, 2008.
7 Jacka 2006.
8 Ibid., 178–79.
9 Ibid., 172.

It is necessary to have an updated investigation into how migration affects rural women's intergenerational and conjugal relationships and how they exert agency and express subjectivity in intimate relationships. Using individual examples drawn from fieldwork, I examine these questions by focusing on rural migrant women, and in particular, two waitresses called Ru Nan and Yue, as they look for a partner, engage in a relationship, and settle into post-marriage life.[10] In the next section, I briefly conceptualize agency and subjectivity and how filial piety plays a role in constructing subjectivity. I also consider the changing status of rural women in post-Mao China. I then go on to describe my research methods. The empirical findings indicate how migration has empowered migrant women in some ways but has also introduced new problems. The pursuit of romantic love can conflict with filial obligations. The term filial daughter was defined and redefined throughout negotiations over choosing a partner and married life, illustrating how agency was exercised, how subjectivity was crafted, and how filial piety was practised.

Conceptualizing Agency, Subjectivity and Filial Piety

Several disciplines, such as philosophy and sociology, deal with the concept of agency from their own specific discipline-based perspectives. Indeed, agency is theory-laden and has a lengthy genealogy in other disciplines, the discussion of which are beyond the scope of this article. Rather, I conceptualize agency within the realm of feminist studies. Kalpana Wilson argues that agency had long been used to describe men but that the discourse of women's agency was not developed until the rise of the feminist movement.[11] The concept was harnessed by feminist activists in order to promote women's self-esteem and to organize women to rediscover resistance and act for change against male dominance.[12]

With regard to definitions, Sherry Ortner has argued that '"agency" is virtually synonymous with the forms of power people have at their disposal, their ability to act on their own behalf and influence other people and events and to maintain some kind of control in their own lives.[13] Laura Ahearn has paid attention to how agency is socially and culturally mediated and how it functions as the capacity to act.[14] It is rarely controversial to interpret agency as the capacity to act and bring about effects. Nevertheless, agency should not only be construed as the ability to act. Other embodiments of agency need to be addressed, including speech practices[15] and silence.[16] It should be noted that I recognize that various forms of agency are innately rooted in every human being.

10 Apart from the given name of Ru Nan, all names are pseudonyms.
11 Wilson 2007.
12 Gardiner 1995; McNay 2000; Ahearn 2001.
13 Ortner 2001, 78.
14 Ahearn 2001, 112.
15 Madhok 2013.
16 Demetriou 2001; Kandiyoti 1988; Parpart 2010.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016000357 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Subjectivity, as some scholars have contended, "is a reality based in practices."[17] It is constructed through a person's location in a social field or set of social relationships.[18] It "is the way in which individuals interpret and understand their circumstances and is bound up with the sense they have of themselves."[19] Also, it implies a "subject as a productive and singular agent of change."[20]

Scholars often discuss agency and subjectivity together without considering the relationship between them. Agency and subjectivity impact each other. The ability to act, to take some control over one's life (agency), affects how the subject perceives her/himself and the situation in which she/he is positioned (subjectivity); in turn, her/his perceptions of the environment and her/himself impact on the willingness and ability to act. I argue that both agency and subjectivity make sense of the interrelation of the external world and the internal self, and therefore both are considered meaningful ways of addressing social inequality. But, agency and subjectivity stress different aspects of making an action. Agency is more the exercise of power through practices, whereas subjectivity is considered the perception of the self in relation to the world outside. My research suggests that by linking these concepts it is possible to gain a greater understanding of the way people act and perceive themselves.

In my fieldwork, I found that filial piety/obligation plays a meaningful role in ingenerational relationships. It is important to interrogate how the concepts of agency and subjectivity interplay with filial piety to explain female rural migrant workers' practices in intimate relationships. The practices of filial piety include, but are not limited to, supporting parents materially and mentally, and remaining obedient towards parents even when they are wrong.[21] I found Michel Foucault's articulation of subjectivity helpful to explain the interplay between subjectivity and filial piety. Subjectivity is formed under the influence of aesthetics and norms prevailing at a specific time.[22] Furthermore, he argues that the recognition of people's moral duties is achieved through "self-forming activity."[23] Inspired by Foucault, I recognize that subjectivity is fluid and relates to social norms in specific contexts. I adopt his theory to analyse my informants' ideas and practices and how practices shape and re-shape subjectivity. In the context of China, filial piety is a traditional ethical code that is still widely observed today, thanks to heavy promotion by the state. I consider that my informants' subjectivity was internalized through moral codes of familial obligations. Filial practices can be viewed as self-forming activities, through the process of which a filial self is crafted.

Although the values of being filial and obedient to parents were challenged during the Cultural Revolution, they have been revived in contemporary

17 Kelly 2008, 103.
18 McDowell 2009, 66–67.
19 Knights and McCabe 2000, 423.
20 Evans 2007, 23.
21 Fei 1992; Liu, H.W. 1959; Whyte 2004; Zhan and Montgomery 2003.
22 Foucault 2000.
23 Ibid., 265

China.[24] The government has been making efforts to emphasize the value of filial piety and to encourage children to take care of their elderly in order to compensate for the deficiencies in the current social welfare system.[25] In this context, filial piety is internalized as crucial to people's subject formation. Interestingly, the migrant workers did not passively accept this moral code; they redefined it by their actions. For example, Yue's case demonstrates that the notion of a filial daughter can be redefined as providing financial support to the parents, regardless of the fact that she resisted her parents' attempts to influence her choice of partner.

The Changing Status of Migrant Women

Women are not a homogeneous group. Instead of reviewing women's status in general, this section primarily focuses on the changing status of rural women. It is undeniable that rural women are empowered in various ways after migration. The nationwide reports on "Chinese women's social status," published decennially from 1990 by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) and All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), provide evidence that migration positively impacts women's ability to make decisions on personal issues such as finding a partner and family issues.[26] In addition, the decreasing suicide rate among rural women offers a further indicator of their empowerment. Some authors have highlighted the disproportionately high suicide rate among women with a rural *hukou* in the 1980s and 1990s,[27] but the most recent findings show that the situation is changing. The latest figures show that the suicide rate for women was significantly higher than that for men from 1987 to 1997, but declined in the 2000s.[28] Some scholars have argued that the lowering female suicide rate can be explained by migration. Through migration, rural women are able to cast off their subordinate status in the household and leave behind family disputes. Furthermore, pesticides (previously the dominant suicide method) are less available to them after migration.[29]

Although there are promising findings of migrant women's empowerment, migration can also have an undesirable impact on rural women. Migrant workers are lower paid, enjoy fewer social benefits, and have poorer living conditions than the local average, and they have to endure long working hours and discrimination from urbanites. According to the NBS and ACWF 2011 report, the main problems encountered by female migrant workers included "being looked down upon" and "salary default or deduction," which suggests that some basic demands such as being respected and the timely payment of wages remained

24 Feuchtwang 2010; Whyte 2004; Xu and Ji 1999.
25 Chen 1996; Harrell and Santos forthcoming; Wang, Danyu 2004
26 NBS and ACWF 2001, 2011.
27 Jacka 2006; Lee, Sing, and Kleinman 2003; Murphy 2004.
28 Liu, Yuting, et al. 2010; Wang, Chong Wen, Chan and Yip 2014; Zhong and Gui 2011.
29 Jing, Wu and Zhang 2010.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016000357 Published online by Cambridge University Press

unmet.[30] In addition, rural women were still disadvantaged not only relative to urban women but also to both rural and urban men. In terms of gender differences, the urban and rural division was still substantial. A total of 54.3 per cent of urban women had received a high school education, compared to 19.2 per cent of rural women; additionally, rural women devoted much more time to housework than urban women did. Rural women's earnings equalled only 56 per cent of men's earnings in 2010.[31]

In his discussion of rural women's changing situation in contemporary China, Yunxiang Yan has emphasized the rising power of women and young couples over parental authority, a phenonmenon he describes as "the triumph of conjugality over patriarchy."[32] However, some scholars still consider it too premature to make this claim, because although in some ways transformation has taken place, in others, patriarchal norms and practices have prevailed.[33] My observations support this latter view. My female informants experienced changes in complex and contradictory ways, a finding which is substantiated by the empirical evidence discussed later in this article.

Methodology

My data comes from fieldwork which took place over the course of seven months during 2011 and 2014. In order to observe the life experiences of rural migrant workers, I primarily worked in the Meteor Restaurant (a pseudonym), a five-storey restaurant in Shanghai with 300 staff; 96 per cent of the full-time workers in the restaurant were migrant workers from rural areas.

I used participant observation to investigate the behaviour of service workers and their interactions in the workplace, the dormitories and leisure-activity venues. In addition, I conducted interviews to explore the migrant workers' well-being, migration experiences and intimate relationships. Data on intimate relationships mostly originated from interviewing, because intimate relationships can hardly be observed in the field. I interviewed 49 informants, with an average age of 24, in the restaurant for an average time of 76.6 minutes per interview. Of the interviewees, 21 were female. I guaranteed anonymity to my informants at the very beginning of the fieldwork and reiterated this guarantee at the beginning of each interview.

From January to April 2012, I worked on a one-day-on and one-day-off basis. Most of the time, I worked as a waitress in the compartment area or the hall area. Occasionally, I worked as a pantry helper in order to observe and to find opportunities to interview the pantry helpers.[34] In July 2012, I revisited the restaurant

30 NBS and ACWF 2011.
31 The report did not suggest that rural women were compared to rural men or men in general.
32 Yan, Yunxiang 2003, 14.
33 Brandtstädter and Santos 2009.
34 Pantry helpers are those who connect the back of house (kitchen) to the front of house (dining area). They deliver dishes from the kitchen to the dining area.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016000357 Published online by Cambridge University Press

for three weeks. I worked as a waitress again in order to observe any changes in the restaurant and with the employees. In order to collect more materials and keep myself updated, I revisited the restaurant from December 2012 to January 2013, June to July 2013 and March to April 2014, during which periods I conducted some follow-up interviews and observations. From the very beginning of the fieldwork I repeatedly read the field notes, the interview summaries I wrote immediately after each interview, and also the full transcripts of certain interviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Its techniques of repetition, similarities and differences are core to this method.[35] The process of identifying themes was based on the following principles: themes that I considered important to the migrants; recurring themes; themes of similarities and differences within the group; themes that differed from the literature; and themes that linked to the research questions. Themes were identified based on intensive and repeated readings of the interview summaries and field notes.[36]

Emipiral Findings

Choosing a partner and marriage negotiations are complicated and interactive processes. The variation of marital status contributes to the different experiences and self-understanding of migrant women. In this section, I first use Ru Nan's case study to explore how she embodied the idea of filial piety as a moral principle to regulate her behaviour. Exemplified by the case of Yue, I then consider the contradiction and conflict between being filial and pursuing romantic love. I also address how Yue's relationships with her parents-in-law and partner reflected her post-marriage status. The last part discusses the rising power of married migrant women and the perpetuation of conventional gender ideas and practices. All three parts respond to the question of how women's agency was exerted and subjectivity was represented.

Filial piety of unmarried women

Several of my female informants recounted that they had experienced unfair treatment because of their parents' preference for sons, which corresponds with other research. Son preference is prevalent in many parts of China, especially in rural areas.[37] Although they are treated unfairly, some women still feel obliged to fulfil their filial obligations by sending back remittances and attending arranged matches as required. Ru Nan was one such woman. She was born in 1993. When I met her, I quickly noticed that her first name, Ru Nan, has the same pronunciation as *ru nan* 如男, which literally means "like a man" in Chinese. It is very typical for a family to give this name to a first-born baby

35 Ryan and Bernard 2003, 102.
36 A more detailed discussion of methodology can be seen in Shen 2015a, 2015b.
37 Gao 1993; Qiao 2004; Yuan and Shi 2005.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016000357 Published online by Cambridge University Press

who happens to be female in the hope that the second child is a son. I asked her whether her parents favoured her brother. She answered, "of course." She said that her parents tended to give better food to her brother. However, she was reticent about disclosing more details about the son preference of her parents.

When I first met her in 2012, Ru Nan had been working as a waitress for three years and had been turning over all her savings to her mother. Her mother used the savings to pay the tuition fees for her younger brother to attend high school and college. When asked why she did not continue with her studies, Ru Nan simply said that it was because she was dumb (*ben* 笨). She told me that she wanted to have her own savings but her brother was a freshman at college and required a large amount of money. She reiterated on several occasions that she wished to save some money for herself. Nevertheless, considering her brother's situation, she understood that it was not possible to do so. Both her wages and those of her mother were saved for her brother's tuition fees and living expenses in Shanghai. During my research, I have come across quite a few cases in which a woman migrates and earns money for her brother's medical fees, tuition fees or betrothal gifts, but have never found a case where the opposite is true.[38] This echoes other findings: in the patriarchal family in China, a woman's money is more likely to be used to pay for her brother's tuition fees, housing and betrothal gifts in preparation for his marriage.[39] By contrast, boys tend to use their money to build a house and save for their own betrothal gifts. A woman's patriarchal practices and filial obligations might persist after migration.[40] As a result, a female migrant's ability to control her own life may be jeopardized.

I tried to console Ru Nan by saying that she could save money for herself once her brother had graduated. She replied: "I will be getting married at that time!" Female migrants still face pressure from their families to marry, and Ru Nan's parents had been arranging matches for her. She went back to her home village for an arranged match at the end of 2012. The man came from a well-off family in the local village. Because of her height and dark skin, Ru Nan's father asked her to put insoles into her shoes so she would look taller and advised her to whiten herself with make-up for this match. He thought Ru Nan would "lose face" if the man did not like her. In response to her father's advice, she piled up insoles in her shoes but did not whiten herself. It turned out that the man had a satisfactory level of interest in her but she had no feelings for him. Knowing that, her father took pity on her. Ru Nan exercised agency by refusing this man. By postponing marriage, Ru Nan would be able to to save money for herself once her brother had graduated.

38 "Betrothal gifts," or "brideprice" (*cai li* or *pin li*), as defined by Yunxiang Yan (1996, 179), "commonly refers to the property transferred from the groom's family to the bride's family" and usually consists of money and goods.
39 Fan 2004; Tan 2009.
40 Jin 2011; Tan 2009.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016000357 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Ru Nan said that she had no plans for the future and that she did not know what the most important things in life were. It seemed that she was not living for herself. Her comments reflect how by being a responsible sister and a filial daughter, her personal ambitions and desires were subordinated to those of her family. Her relational role was defined as an older sister and a daughter in the family rather than as an individual. In regard to how migration affects rural women, some Chinese scholars have found that although patrilocal residence is declining through migration, at least temporarily, patriarchy is still being perpetuated, albeit in transformed ways. Male preference and the male line of succession are still pervasive, and the denial of women' rights is not uncommon.[41]

The perpetuation of filial piety and Yue's rising power in conjugal relations

The perpetuation of the filial piety of married women is exemplified by the experience of waitress Yue. Her case illuminates the constant negotiations with her parents, her rising power in conjugal relations and her consistent subjectivity as a filial daughter, even when undergoing the transition from an unmarried girl to a married mother. Exerting agency, she actively engaged in redefining the term "filial daughter." Her detailed accounts reveal the complexity of her subjectivity mediated through filial piety.

Although the home villages of Yue and her boyfriend were located in the same province, it took four to five hours to travel by bus from Yue's home village to that of her boyfriend, which was the main reason her parents opposed their relationship. It is a convention that rural people are expected to find a partner whose home village is close to their own. However, migration enlarges the pool of potential partners, meaning that choice is no longer constrained by birthplace, and adult children have more power over the choice of partner.[42] Nevertheless, parents still prefer their children to find partners close to their home villages. Both my fieldwork findings and Gaeano's research have revealed that geographical distance between a couple's home villages is one of the primary causes of parental opposition.[43] This is mirrored by Yue's case. As she recounted:

> We [Yue and her boyfriend] were caught by my father on the street. My dad beat me and scolded me on the way back home … after going back, my dad said that he firmly disagreed with us being together, asked me to break up with him, and told me not to go to work tomorrow. I lied to him. I said I would quit on the 10th, the day I got paid. He said that was fine. Actually I didn't wait until the 10th; I eloped with my boyfriend on the 8th.

Although her parents strongly opposed the relationship, Yue resisted them by lying and then eloping with her partner. The process was by no means easy; it was full of struggle and conflict, not only with her natal family, but also with her partner:

41 Jin 2011; Ma 2003.
42 Yan, Yunxiang 2003.
43 Gaetano 2008.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016000357 Published online by Cambridge University Press

We moved to Jing'an district 静安区. For the first two days we stayed in his friend's flat, then we rented a flat on our own. He found a new job, and I found a job as well, so we started work … The first day, I switched off my mobile phone, but I was worried about my parents so I gave them a call. I said: "I won't be back until you agree." My dad was angry and started to scold me. So I ended the call. I was frightened and began to cry. Later on, I called back from time to time. Each time my dad asked me where I was living. He said he agreed to us being together and wanted to come and visit us. But I didn't dare tell him where I was. My boyfriend quarrelled with me every day. He tried to stop me calling home for fear that my parents would find us. I always cried and said that I missed my family, so I kept calling them.

Elopement can be viewed as resistance but also as a strategy to obtain parental consent. Yue faced pressure from both her family and her boyfriend during the period of elopement. She was scared but resolved to stay with her boyfriend and made persistent efforts to obtain consent from her parents, which reflects her subjectivity as a filial daughter. Her filial piety can be seen in her consistent financial support of her parents and her elder brother. As she recounted:

At that time I earned 1,200 [yuan]. I usually gave my parents 1,000 and kept 200 to spend … if it was not enough, my boyfriend paid the rest. Before elopement, I left behind all my wages and savings for my parents, I didn't keep a penny. Rent and everything else was paid for by my boyfriend. My family is not well off, and I have a younger brother. My elder brother had just got married, and my parents were still in debt. I have known how difficult it is for my parents to save money since I was a child. So, I gave all my money to them.

Yue behaved with filial piety in economic issues but not in terms of personal relationships. She performed filial obedience and supported the whole family. As pointed out earlier, daughters are more likely to share the family burden, including brothers' tuition fees and brideprice. Similar to the situation of waitress Ru Nan, migration did not improve Yue's financial status because she did not have savings of her own.

Pregnancy can be used not only to obtain permission from parents, as in Yue's case, but also as a tool in negotiating betrothal gifts between the two families. Yue treated pregnancy as a trigger to inform her parents in order to obtain their consent:

After four months, I became pregnant, and I told my parents. My parents agreed to our marriage because I was pregnant, and asked his [her boyfriend's] parents to come to Shanghai to have a meeting. My brother said that he wanted to visit me, and I told him my address. After my brother's visit, my dad came the next day. We were still sleeping when my dad knocked on the door. I was scared. Oh my God! I didn't dare say much, although my dad had agreed over the phone to us being together. Later, my boyfriend's dad came to Shanghai. At first we required some money from his dad to have the wedding ceremony in his home village, but he said their family didn't have that much, and disapproved. My dad asked me to get an abortion if they didn't agree to the amount of money. I thought for a while. My dad's insistence was right, you see, I eloped with him, but his parents didn't agree to this amount of money. I was angry and called my boyfriend: "If your dad cannot give that much, I will get an abortion tomorrow." That night, he called me and asked me not to go to the hospital and said his dad would be coming to Shanghai soon.

Yue pursued romantic love against her parents' wishes. The pattern of "get pregnant and then get married" was a recurring theme narrated by quite a few of my female informants. It may serve as a form of resistance under the guise of an

unintended consequence because it makes it more difficult for a family to intervene in a daughter's love relationship and to separate the couple.

However, when it came to the stage of brideprice negotiation, she conformed to her father's idea, using her body as a bargaining chip and threatening to put her unborn baby at risk. Elopement and pregnancy are gestures and statements in the pursuit of romantic love, yet she still felt the need to be a filial daughter; she tried hard to obtain her father's consent to her marriage and even assisted her parents in negotiating the betrothal gifts with her boyfriend's family. As discussed in the preceding section, being a filial child conventionally implies obeying one's parents. Yue reframed the embodiment of filial piety during the course of negotiations with her parents and her boyfriend. She shifted the boundaries of filial piety, obeying her parents by supporting them financially but resisting them with regard to personal relationships. Her actions suggest that, by her definition, obeying parents on partner choice is no longer a necessary component of filial obligation but providing parents with financial support is.

Yue said that her boyfriend's family finally met her family's requirements by borrowing money from outside sources. It turned out that after Yue got married, her parents-in-law treated her very well every time she visited them, although she never had the chance to stay long with her husband's natal family:

> My parents-in-law treat me very well, you see, their financial situation is not good. A year later, after I gave birth, when Xiao Bao [the baby] was one year old, they said to us that since we had just married, and we are basically penniless, they would like to raise Xiao Bao so that we can go out and *dagong* 打工 (do manual work). Each time I visit them, they wash my clothes and cook for me. I neither cook nor wash the dishes. They do everything. After dinner, I go to sleep with Xiao Bao upstairs, and they begin to wash the dishes. If I soak my clothes in the basin, my parents-in-law sense that I am going to wash the clothes and they wash them for me. If I finished the washing by myself, they would hang it up to dry. They treat me quite well.

Her parents-in-law encouraged the couple to migrate and took the initiative to raise the child for them. Moreover, they did all the housework and were very considerate, which contrasts with traditional post-marriage intergenerational behaviour. In pre-Mao China, a daughter-in-law was expected to do all such work, but this feminized responsibility as a daughter-in-law was not imposed on Yue. The reversed intergenerational responsibility can be viewed as a decline of parental power and a rise in the status of daughters-in-law, which is also reflected in the diminishing power of mothers-in-law that has been seen both in the Mao era[44] and in the post-Mao era.[45] The young couple's stay in Shanghai would not have been possible without the support of the parents in the husband's natal family.

Married women such as Yue are able to be free from childcare and household chores in the husband's natal family, and thus they are empowered. Interestingly, Yue fulfilled her role as a filial daughter by continuously supporting her natal family financially:

44 Parish and Whyte 1978, 244, 246.
45 Yan, Yunxiang 1996, 2003.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016000357 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I am in charge of money. Sometimes, I give pocket money to my mum, 500, 1000 [yuan]. Sometimes, I use our mutual savings and I will let him [her husband] know, sometimes I use my secret stash (*sifang qian* 私房钱) so he doesn't know.

Yue's control over money can also be seen in the fact that she had the final say over the distribution of the household income. She argued with her husband about how they should use their income but managed the situation her own way and was supported by her parents-in-law:

I insisted on buying a house. He didn't want to. I just insisted. I badgered him about buying it. I said we had to buy. We had 50,000 yuan of savings. He had planned to save it for his future business … He is a chef. He just wanted to save some money and run a restaurant. I thought, what if his business fails? We had been married for three years, and our child was four years old, I thought the child is growing up, but [we have] no money and no house. So, I wanted to buy a house. But, he wanted to save the money to open a restaurant. I sent all the money back to his parents, along with tens of thousands of borrowed money, and asked his parents to buy a house in the town. He could do nothing about it. This was what I wanted to buy.

Two points suggest Yue's rising power in her post-marriage life. First, Yue had pocket money and saved it for her natal family, which is a phenomenon not usually seen in previous generations when women had no control over what they earned, or when they did not take part in activities with direct monetary returns. And her husband did not oppose her providing financial support to her natal family. Second, in the conflicts regarding the redistribution of the money, Yue took control of the financial resources and made the final decision. Even her parents-in-law supported her decision by using the remittance to buy a house for Yue and her husband. This reflected her agency and power of decision-making in conjugal relations, although she adhered to the social norm of residing patrilocally.

Yue's continuous economic support of her natal family demonstrates a form of filial piety which is echoed in Whyte's findings in urban Hebei province.[46] A complicated and paradoxical picture is displayed here. A daughter's support for the natal family, both prior to and after marriage, without any return signifies not only the perpetuation of filial obedience but also the transforming power of conjugal relations. A conjugal family appears to be more equal in that married women, such as Yue, have more say in household decisions and more control over economic redistribution. Therefore, they tend to give their natal family more support, both financially and emotionally. However, a woman has no inheritance rights in her natal family but nevertheless has to bear the burden of elder care.[47] A woman embodies the ethics of filial piety and practice according to expectations. A married woman has to support not only her own natal family but also that of her husband, a double burden not experienced by her male counterparts.

46 Whyte 2004.
47 Harrell and Santos forthcoming; Jin 2011; Ma 2003; Tang, Ma and Jin 2009.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016000357 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The complex empowerment process of married women

The paradoxical implications of women's empowerment are shown in the case of Yue. There are signs that women experience greater empowerment after migration despite the fact that they also adhere to traditional norms. This section further elaborates the complexity and contradiction of women's rising power as it conflicts and/or conforms with conventional norms. I point out different aspects of female empowerment gained through marriage and the perpetuation of feminine subjectivity that valorizes the gender division of labour.

As discussed at the beginning of this article, I have adopted the term temporary non-patrilocality to suggest the change of household structure during the period when the migrant workers under study were living in Shanghai. In the public area of the Meteor Restaurant, 71.6 per cent of female workers were married at the time the information was collected in April 2012, whereas 34.9 per cent of male workers were married.[48] Migration makes this temporary mode of residence possible and brings changes to patriarchal practices. It is important to investigate how the post-marital pattern of the migrant workers' residence affects gender relations.

The empowerment of married women in relation to migration is evidenced not only by Yue's case but also by those of my other female informants. After migration, the conventional gender division of labour in the domestic area persists but new patterns also emerge. The rising power of married women is a conspicuous theme in my findings and I illuminate this theme by examining how these women escape from entangled patriarchal relationships in rural areas, the decreasing amount of housework, the de facto weakening gender division of labour in households and women's greater decision-making power within the households.

Many workers, such as cleaner Xia and waitress Yue, stated that they were better off compared to their own mothers or their former selves when living in rural areas. Through migration, a married woman can avoid not only complex relationships with her husband's family in the patrilocal residence but also farmwork and childcare, both of which are otherwise assumed to be her responsibility. For example, Jie, a shift leader of the waiting staff, explained:

> My husband is doing business. He can earn five to six thousand per month. Our child is in Shanghai, taken care of by his aunt. My husband asked me not to do this job a long time ago. But staying at home is boring, the relationships with his relatives in the village are annoying, so I just keep working.

Migrant women such as Jie can empower themselves by escaping from patriarchal relationships in their home villages, as Beynon found.[49] In rural areas, housework is generally performed by women. When asked who did more housework at home in Shanghai, however, the most frequent answer given by my informants was, "It depends, whoever has time will do the housework." Migrant men's

48 Public area refers to areas other than the kitchen, and includes the reception, dining area, pantry area, bars and cashier desk. My research focused on staff in the public area.

49 Beynon 2004.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016000357 Published online by Cambridge University Press

greater involvement in housework is a significant change. In addition, the overall burden of housewok is reduced in Shanghai because living space for most married migrant couples is too tiny to generate a significant amount of housework. As waitress Qin Zhang said: "My husband is a driver for Carrefour. He is provided with staff accommodation. He has to work every day and I just rest four days a month, so we don't usually do housework."

Qin Zhang's remarks are similar to those of pantry helper Bai Lian. He explained that, "I feel that there is no housework in my home. The studio is tiny." When asked who would do the housework if they were in the home village, he responded, "Definitely she [his wife] would do the housework." The domestic burden was significantly reduced for the married migrant women compared to their rural counterparts for several reasons: their living space was very limited, which meant they did not have much housework to do; their long working hours constrained the time available to devote to housework; most of them did not have children living with them in Shanghai, so they avoided the responsibility of childcare; and two meals a day were provided by the restaurant, which meant that they did not need to cook at home.[50] In this respect, more gender-egalitarian conjugal relations can be witnessed in a non-patrilocal residence.

Empowerment can also be observed in decision-making processes. Yue made the final decision on house-buying despite her husband's initial objection, which suggests the important role she played in household decisions. Yue was not alone in exhibiting this empowerment. When asked who made the decisions in her family, Qin Zhang answered:

> Men are the masters of the house in most of the families in China. In my family, important decisions are made by my husband whereas trivial decisions are made by me. However, *what is considered important or trivial is defined by me* (her emphasis).

The last sentence in the above comment suggests that Qin Zhang actually had significant decision-making power within her household. Nevertheless, I found that the traditional gender division of labour persisted among some of my informants. Cashier Hubei justified the fact that women did the majority of domestic work by saying, "Why do women live longer? Statistics show that it is because women do more housework." When asked who did most of the housework in their families, some female migrants, such as cleaner Xia, waitress Yadong and Yue, expressed their opinion that men should not do women's work. As Yue claimed:

> I do all the housework and he doesn't do any. I feel like men should not wash clothes and cook. I think men should prioritize their career. After he comes home, I wash his socks and shoes, he doesn't wash them. I don't allow him to do the washing. And he's not in the habit of cooking or washing the dishes.

Yue's husband was a chef but he did not cook at home. Although Yue had bargaining power within the marriage, she still felt it was her responsibility to do all

50 The time devoted to housework is an important indicator for evaluating gender equality. See the survey on women's status conducted by ACWF and NBS (NBS and ACWF 2001, 2011).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016000357 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the housework. Some women were willing to take on more housework. They crafted their feminine subjectivity by embodying the feminized norms and reproducing them, which served to reinforce the conventional gender division of labour within the household. These rural women were unprecedentedly empowered in some ways following their shift in geographical location, but they still held conventional ideas about what is considered to be women's work.

Conclusion

In this article, I have demonstrated how the migrant women under study exercise agency and subjectivity, albeit within the confines of social norms. Their obedience and resistance are mediated through filial piety. In China today, migration provides women with unprecedented choices in terms of employment and partner choice. However, son preference is not uncommon and daughters are more likely to make compromises for the sake of the whole family. Although the conventional social norms of filial piety are not outdated, the search for romantic love is attractive to migrant women. However, the pursuit of romantic love and the strains of having to fulfil filial expectations result in fierce personal struggles as well as constant conflicts with their natal family. By exerting agency, the women have to undergo constant negotiations with their parents. The term filial piety is defined and redefined through the negotiations over finding a marriage partner. Sending remittances, while contravening social norms with respect to cohabitation, reflects the ambivalent subjectivity of the female migrants. Although Yue's case seems to be a daughter-conquering-parents story, the pressure on these young women is still remarkable.

In the context of temporary non-patrilocal modes of residence, some married migrant women are empowered in the sense that that they have control over what they earn and have less housework to do; however, they are still constrained by their filial obligations and therefore feel obliged to contribute to their natal families, even though they are not entitled to inherit family property.

Above all, the migrant women's interactions with their families are complicated, and it is naive to dichotomize the conduct of these women as either rebellious or filial. The intersection of filial piety, conventional gender norms and migrant women's rising power are factors that these women have to reconcile; how they do so is influenced by, and in turn exerts influence on, their subjectivity.

Biographical note

Yang Shen did her PhD in gender studies at the London School of Economics. She is an assistant professor in the School of International and Public Affairs at Shanghai Jiao Tong University. Her research interests focus on feminist theories, qualitative research methods, contemporary China studies, migration studies, urban informal settlements and employment studies. She recently published "Why does the government fail to improve the living conditions of migrant workers in Shanghai? Reflections on the policies and the implementations of public

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016000357 Published online by Cambridge University Press

rental housing under neoliberalism" in the peer-reviewed journal *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*.

摘要: 持续的大规模的城乡移民中断了中国农村传统的父权社会, 使得暂时的非 "从夫居" 居住模式成为可能。这一新的居住模式对农民工的生活产生深远影响。基于参与式观察以及访谈, 此文致力于探索女性农民工在打工之后如何在亲密关系中发挥主观能动性, 以及表达主体性。通过研究未婚与已婚女性与父母以及伴侣的关系, 该文展示了打工女性地位变化的复杂图景。这些女性既服从又挑战了孝顺的观念, 她们在实践中重新定义什么是孝顺, 在实践中发挥了主观能动性, 并塑造了 "孝顺的女儿" 的主体性。

关键词: 主观能动性; 主体性; 孝顺; 女性农民工; 亲密关系

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